

Competing Complex Adaptive Systems in Schleiermacher's Germany: Enlightenment Liberal Cosmopolitanism, Romantic Nationalism, and Emergent Performativity

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When Napoleon conquered the German-speaking states in 1806, the reigning political system in all of them—sclerotic autocracy—seemed relatively stable, like a divinely ordained state of affairs. The French conquest and occupation was the symmetry-breaking force that revealed the non-equilibrium at the core of autocracy, and launched nearly two centuries of developmental volatility. This paper situates Romantic translation theory in the political-historical context of that volatility, and specifically in the developmental tensions between the complex adaptive systems launched against sclerotic autocracy by reformers: liberal cosmopolitanism, from the “West” (the French and English/Scottish Enlightenment), and homegrown Romantic Nationalism (Friedrich Schlegel and the other Jena Romantics).

The address that Friedrich Schleiermacher delivered to the Royal Academy of Sciences on June 24, 1813, “Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersetzens”/“On the Different Methods of Translating,” is normally read in terms of its respectable academic theses, all of which were derived from the liberal cosmopolitanism of the time; and yet the center could not hold. Schleiermacher was also a zealous nationalist, whose nationalist fervor kept overflowing its bounds, until it nearly got him banished from Berlin as well, just a month after the Academy address on translation. Schleiermacher's Academy address remains one of the most influential statements informing contemporary translation theory. The sphere of influence spread by Berman and Venuti is remarkable—and it is *all* based on the calm liberal cosmopolitanism in Schleiermacher's address, conceived reductively as a stable state. This paper rereads the address through the complex tensions striating it by situating it in the (neg)entropic vectors of German political developmentalism, as several different political adaptive systems out of equilibrium struggled for ascendancy in the turmoil of the War of Liberation.